

Child and adolescent mental health: Get the Message



Every child's mental health
is important.

Many children have
mental health problems.

These problems are real, painful
and can be severe.

Mental health problems can be
recognized and treated.

Caring families and communities
working together can help.



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CHILD AND ADOLESCENT Mental Health



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Children and adolescents can have serious mental health problems



Like adults, children and adolescents can have mental health disorders that interfere with the

way they think, feel and act. When untreated, mental health disorders can lead to school failure, family conflicts, drug abuse, violence, and in the extreme, suicide. Untreated mental disorders can be very costly to families, communities and the health care system.

Mental health disorders in children and adolescents are caused mostly by biology and environment. Examples of biological causes are genetics, chemical imbalances in the body or damage to the central nervous system such as a head injury. Examples of environmental causes include exposure to toxins, exposure to violence, witnessing or being the victim of physical or sexual abuse or stress related to chronic poverty or the loss of important people through death, divorce or broken relationships.

When to Get Help

Children and adolescents with mental health problems need to get help as soon as possible. Pay attention if a child or adolescent you know has any of these warning signs:

- ◆ Refusing to attend or declining performance in school
- ◆ Extreme fearfulness or excessive worrying
- ◆ Persistent sadness and crying or hopelessness
- ◆ Recurrent negative feelings about oneself
- ◆ Uncontrollable anger or outbursts or overreacting
- ◆ Constant concern about physical problems or appearance
- ◆ Repetitive habits and rituals such as hand-washing, counting or touching
- ◆ Worry about being harmed, hurting others or doing something “bad”
- ◆ Excessive sexual thoughts or actions
- ◆ Having racing thoughts that are almost too fast to follow
- ◆ Repetitive stealing
- ◆ Using alcohol or other drugs
- ◆ Eating large amounts of food and then purging or abusing laxatives to avoid weight gain
- ◆ Obsessive dieting and/or exercising
- ◆ Seeing things or hearing voices that cannot be explained



Finding the right service is critical

To find the right services for their children, parents can do the following:

- Get accurate information from hot-lines, libraries, the Internet or the Department of Mental Health
- Seek referrals from professionals including pediatricians or school guidance counselors
- Ask questions about treatments and services
- Talk to other families in their communities
- Find family network organizations such as the Parents Professional Advocacy League (www.ppal.net)

Serious emotional disturbances affect 1 in every 10 young people at any given time.